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Dangerous Crossing: The Gendered Grotesque in the Selected Stories of Joyce Carol Oates

Genderová groteska ve vybraných povídkách Joyce Carol Oates

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyse selected short stories by Joyce Carol Oates from the perspective of intersecting gender and the grotesque, and to determine the significance of gender and gender roles or stereotypes in the grotesque present in the aforementioned texts. This thesis focuses especially on the theme of gendered violence, as it is an important element in all analysed stories: “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, “Heat,” “Haunted,” “The Premonition,” and “Extenuating Circumstances.” The first part of this thesis is theoretical and is concerned with the summary and comparison of selected major theories of the grotesque and gender, emphasising especially the motifs and themes that are found in the short stories (bodily grotesque, violence, gender performativity, and the forms of gender or sexuality that transgress the binary and heteronormative framework).

The second chapter addresses the term “grotesque,” which is defined according to its etymology, and follows the historical changes of its meaning. It also describes the importance of the grotesque in visual arts, based especially on Frances S. Connelly’s research, and focuses mainly on the possible parallels between the visual and the literary grotesque, which is the last topic of the second chapter. The grotesque is defined here according to Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser, whose perspectives are mutually compared and contrasted. The second chapter concludes with the critique of these theories from a feminist position, represented by Mary Russo, who focuses mainly on the critical review of the Bakhtinian grotesque body, the carnivalesque, and his understanding of femininity as inherently grotesque.

The third chapter attempts to answer the question of whether there is a specifically American grotesque, using the conclusions of Harold Bloom and James Schewill who list certain historical and cultural specifics as bases for the American grotesque as an independent literary phenomenon. The third chapter also includes a typology of grotesque characters coined by Maria Haar, which is then applied further in the practical part of the thesis.

The fourth chapter defines the term “gender” based on the concept of gender performativity; its foundation is seen in the scholarship of Simone de Beauvoir, but the main source of the understanding of gender in this thesis is the critical work of Judith

Butler, together with that of Michel Foucault and Monique Wittig. The processes of gendering the body and identity of an individual are presented as normative and fully dependent on the binary and heteronormative framework which is enforced by society. The society also punishes an individual for not adhering to this normative framework. These very transgressing and non-normative bodies and identities are studied in relation to the grotesque because they have been traditionally considered inherently grotesque.

In the fifth chapter the presented theory is applied to the aforementioned five short stories. They are analysed from the perspectives of the gendered grotesque and gendered violence, which appear to a different extent and in different forms in all five stories. The stories are also compared to each other.

The conclusion emphasises the importance of the gendered grotesque and gendered violence in the analysed short stories and states that the grotesque in these short stories is indisputably intertwined with the question of gender, and that the grotesque effect would not be achieved without gendered elements such as gender roles, stereotypes, gendered violence, and also the grotesque body which is necessarily dependent on the perception of the category of gender. It also states that even though the grotesque in the analysed short stories is rooted in the heteronormative gender binarism, the majority of the protagonists (perpetrators of violence) in different ways transgress this norm, and that is why they are perceived as grotesque by the mainstream reader.

Key words: grotesque, gender, bodily grotesque, Joyce Carol Oates, gendered violence, gender roles, grotesque body

Abstrakt

Cílem této bakalářské práce je analyzovat vybrané povídky Joyce Carol Oates z hlediska průniku grotesky a genderu a zjistit, jakou roli hraje gender a genderové role či stereotypy v grotesce přítomné v těchto textech. Zvláštní pozornost je věnována tématu genderového násilí, které se vyskytuje jako centrální prvek ve všech pěti vybraných povídkách: „Kam jdeš, a odkud?“¹, „Horko“², „Přízraky“³, „Předtucha“⁴, a „Polehčující okolnosti“⁵. První část práce je teoretická a zabývá se shrnutím a srovnáním hlavních teorií grotesky a genderu, přičemž důraz je kladen především na motivy a témata dále se v povídkách vyskytující (groteska tělesnosti; násilí; genderová performativita; formy genderu nebo sexuality, které se odchyľují od binárního a heteronormativního rámce).

Druhá kapitola se obecně zabývá pojmem groteska, který definuje na základě etymologie a sleduje změny významu tohoto pojmu v historii. Následně krátce přiblíží význam grotesky ve vizuálním umění, kde se opírá zejména o výzkum Frances S. Connelly, a zaměřuje se především na možné paralely mezi vizuální a literární groteskou, která je posledním tématem druhé kapitoly. Groteska je definována podle Michaila Bachtina a Wolfganga Kaysera, jejichž teorie jsou navzájem srovnávány. Druhou kapitolu uzavírá kritika těchto teorií z feministické pozice, reprezentované Mary Russo, která se zaměřuje zejména na kritiku bachtinovského groteskního těla, karnavaleska a chápání femininity jako ze své podstaty nutně groteskní.

Třetí kapitola se pokouší odpovědět na otázku, zda existuje specificky americká groteska, a to s pomocí závěrů Harolda Blooma a Jamese Schewilla, kteří jmenují určitá historická a kulturní specifika jako zdroj americké grotesky coby samostatného literárního fenoménu. Třetí kapitola také zahrnuje typologii groteskních postav vytvořenou Marií Haar, která je dále aplikována v praktické části práce.

Čtvrtá kapitola definuje pojem „gender“ na základě genderové performativity, jejíž

¹ v originále „Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?“, překlad převzat: Joyce Carol Oates, „Kam jdeš, a odkud?“, přel. Veronika Klusáková, *Host* 6/2006: 96–98.

² v orig. „Heat“ (vlastní překlad)

³ v orig. „Haunted“, příp. také „Strašidla“, (použito např. u románu *Haunted* Chucky Palahniuka) apod., není možné přeložit jednoznačně bez překladu celé povídky, protože výraz „haunted“ je použit v různých kontextu v různých místech povídky (vlastní překlad)

⁴ v orig. „The Premonition“ (vlastní překlad)

⁵ v orig. „Extenuating Circumstances“ (vlastní překlad)

základ hledá v díle Simone de Beauvoir. Hlavním zdrojem této kapitoly je ale především kritická práce Judith Butler, která spolu s Michelelem Foucaultem a Monique Wittig tvoří teoretický základ chápání genderu v této práci. Procesy genderování těla a identity jedince jsou představeny jako normativní a zcela závislé na binárním a heteronormativním rámci, který společnost uměle vynucuje — a případně trestá jedince za jeho nedodržení a odchýlení se od této normy. Právě nenormativní těla a identity jsou zkoumány v rámci grotesky, protože jsou tradičně považovány za nutně groteskní.

V páté kapitole je představená teorie aplikována na již zmíněných pět povídek. Ty jsou analyzovány z hlediska genderové grotesky a genderového násilí, které se ve všech pěti v různé míře a různých podobách vyskytují. Dané povídky jsou také srovnávány mezi sebou. V závěru tedy práce shrnuje důležitost genderové grotesky a genderového násilí v analyzovaných povídkách a konstatuje, že groteska je v povídkách Joyce Carol Oates s otázkou genderu neoddiskutovatelně propojena a groteskního efektu by nebylo dosaženo bez genderovaných prvků jako jsou genderové role, stereotypy, genderové násilí a také groteskní tělo, které je nutně závislé na vnímání kategorie genderu. Konstatuje také, že ačkoliv je groteska v analyzovaných povídkách založena na heteronormativním genderovém binarismu, protagonisté (pachatelé násilí) se od této normy ve většině případů různým způsobem odchylují, a proto je majoritní čtenář vnímá jako groteskní.

Klíčová slova: groteska, gender, groteskno, tělesná groteska, Joyce Carol Oates, genderové násilí, genderové role, groteskní tělo

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction: Dangerous Crossing	9
Chapter 2 An Attempt to Define the Nature of the Grotesque	11
2. 1 The Convoluted History of the Term “Grotesque”	11
2. 2 The Grotesque in Visual Arts.....	13
2. 3 The Grotesque in Literature.....	15
2. 3. 1 Bakhtin’s Notion of the Grotesque.....	15
2. 3. 2 Kayser’s Notion of the Grotesque.....	18
2. 3. 3 Feminist Contemporary Critique of the Grotesque, the Carnavalesque, and the Grotesque Body	20
Chapter 3 Is There an “American Grotesque”?	24
3. 1 Possible Reasons for the Abundance of the Grotesque in American Literature .	24
3. 2 The Typology of the Grotesque and the Grotesque Characters According to the Analysis of Maria Haar	25
Chapter 4 Thinking Gender	27
4. 1 Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex as a Foundation of the Performative Theory of Gender	27
4. 2 (Un)Doing Gender: Gendering the Body According to Judith Butler’s Theory of Performativity.....	30
4. 3 The Importance of the Gendered Body: Illegible and Inhuman Bodies and the Violence Against Them	33
Chapter 5 Grotesque Elements in Joyce Carol Oates’ Short Stories.....	37
5. 1 “Don’t you know who I am?”—Grotesque Masculinity and the Feminine Victim in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”	38
5. 2 “You have power over others you don’t realize until you test it”—The Mentally Disabled Murderer in “Heat”	42
5. 3 “You never knew who you might meet up with”—The Grotesque Female Murderer in “Haunted”	44
5. 4 The Invisible Violence in the Domestic Space in “The Premonition”	47
5. 5 Infanticide and the Grotesque Mother Body in “Extenuating Circumstances” ..	50
Chapter 6 Conclusion.....	53
Bibliography	56

Chapter 1 Introduction: Dangerous Crossing⁶

Joyce Carol Oates is one of the contemporary writers inseparably connected to the grotesque. She not only proves that the grotesque has not lost any intensity and can still strongly affect the reader, she herself also writes about the importance of the grotesque for and in her work. For Oates, the first encounter with the grotesque was reading Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures Through the Looking-Glass* as a young child;⁷ for many others it was reading her famous short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?". The numerous short stories and novels by Oates are proof that the grotesque should be seen both as a timeless phenomenon, and as contemporary as the culture creating it.

Oates' short stories are also the ideal source for this thesis focusing in great part on gendered violence,⁸ because violence is a very frequent theme throughout the entire body of Oates' literary work. Oates herself states that she has been repeatedly asked the question, "Why is your writing so violent?".⁹ It was this evidently sexist question—implying that a woman is not allowed to write about crime and violence (unless she is herself a victim)—that made me think of asking "In what ways is Oates' writing violent?", and, of course, "Who is responsible for the violence described in her writing?". I attempt to answer these questions in this thesis.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the connection between the grotesque and gender in the selected short stories of Joyce Carol Oates, focusing especially on the aforementioned gendered violence. This aim has met with the challenging question of methodology, as very little has been written specifically on the gendered grotesque or gendered violence in literature. These topics are also necessarily interdisciplinary.

This thesis has been written mainly from the perspective of gender and queer theory, based especially on the theory of gender performativity and the scholarship of

⁶ The title "Dangerous Crossing" refers to the crossing of gender (and thus also sexuality) in Willa Carther's works, most significantly in the novel *My Antonia* where the name of the protagonist (Tommy) deliberately does not reflect gender. Carther's works are discussed by Butler in *Bodies That Matter* as a site of ambivalence, which is manifested as a crossing of the normative restrictions of gender and sexuality. These unintelligible identities, those who "cross gender," are thus precisely the ones read as grotesque.

⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, "Afterword: Reflections on the Grotesque" in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (New York: Plume, 1995) 306.

⁸ i.e. The ways normative gender assumptions, as well as gender roles and stereotypes based on them, affect social perception of violence and connect with it.

⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?" *New York Times* 29 March 1981 via <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/05/specials/oates-violent.html>>.

Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, which naturally intertwines with certain streams of contemporary feminist theory. A large part of the (even contemporary) feminist thought was omitted because it reaffirms the imperative of the gender binary instead of deconstructing it, but there are still feminist theorists who deserve space in this thesis' chapter on gender, namely Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Julia Serano, and others.

The grotesque body and the category of transgressive bodies also offer an opportunity of reading from the perspective of disability studies, as bodies with disabilities have been historically seen as inherently grotesque, just like the bodies of intersex and/or transgender individuals that are considered in gender studies. Disability and able-bodiedness is a necessary category for intersectional analysis just like gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and age; it is, however, frequently omitted, in both critical theory and social sphere.

Chapter 2 An Attempt to Define the Nature of the Grotesque¹⁰

The term “grotesque” has been recognised as notoriously vague and variable and also, as for example Wolfgang Kayser has pointed out, increasingly overused. When one looks for examples of the usage of the word “grotesque” in contemporary English, it is very often apparent that it is only used as a synonym for “strange,” “incredible,” or “unbelievable.” In Kayser’s own words the grotesque is anything but a well-defined and exact scientific category.¹¹

To be able to treat the grotesque as an autonomous and at least to a certain extent defined literary term, we inevitably have to understand the origin of the word and its usage in historical terms. It is also necessary to briefly review the concept of the grotesque in visual arts, as based on Frances S. Connelly’s book *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*. The following chapters will focus on the grotesque in literature and will aim to examine the diverse layers of the contemporary understanding of the literary grotesque, beginning with the two essential thinkers of the grotesque—Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser.

2. 1 The Convoluted History of the Term “Grotesque”

Grotesque, both as a noun and an adjective, is derived from the Italian *la grottesca* (noun) and *grottesco* (adjective), ultimately referring to *grotta* (cave). These terms were coined during late fifteenth-century excavations of Nero’s Golden Palace in Italy and connected to a certain previously unknown ornamental style which was discovered during the exploration of the sites.¹² The walls of Nero’s palace were decorated with fantastic combinations of plants, figures, mythical creatures, and architectural elements.¹³ The word *grottesco* was quickly adopted first by the Renaissance painters and art critics, and was transferred into other European languages during the sixteenth century along with the

¹⁰ Taken from Wolfgang Kayser’s chapter title in his *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966) 179.

¹¹ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966) 17.

¹² Kayser 19.

¹³ Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 3.

ornamental style it designated.

The term spread both as a noun and an adjective, but its exact understanding differed in each language. The first instance of its usage in late sixteenth-century Germany referred to “the monstrous fusion of human and nonhuman elements as the most typical feature of the grotesque style.”¹⁴ This blending of the human and the nonhuman was essential for the grotesque during its history and is still found in many contemporary grotesques. Moreover, Kayser claims that the Renaissance *grottescos* were “not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of the world totally different from the familiar one,”¹⁵ tracing the notorious ambivalence of the grotesque back to its very beginnings.

The French understanding of the new term was very similar, with Michel de Montaigne writing in his essays about “grotesque and monstrous bodies, pieced together of the most diverse members, without distinct form, in which order and proportions are left to chance.”¹⁶ But even with these early attestations of the grotesque as a complex and ambivalent phenomenon, in both German and French the term was mostly used as a *terminus technicus*, commonly in the plural, of the new ornamental style. In seventeenth-century French the word was commonly spelled *crottesque*, which suggests a relation to the Old French *crot*.¹⁷ It is difficult to decide to what extent we should be searching for the origin of the *meaning* of the grotesque in its form and etymology, but Kayser makes a persuasive point about the adjective gaining vaguer and more general meaning than the noun because of the suffix *-esque*, which was common in sixteenth-century French and had two different layers of usage.

Like the comparable Italian suffix *-esco* or German *-isch*, it could be used in connection with proper names and place names to denote origin. But in addition to this literal meaning, the suffix *-esque* is also attached to nouns that can be regarded as spiritual. Kayser explains this process, which differentiates the adjective in meaning from the original noun, by saying that “the adjective provides spiritual orientation by stressing the

¹⁴ Kayser 24.

¹⁵ Kayser 21.

¹⁶ Kayser 24.

¹⁷ Kayser 26.

evaluative and interpretative function inherent in its nature as an adjective. (...) By thus neglecting its material origin, the adjective cuts altogether loose from its tangible meaning.”¹⁸ This is an important idea, as it is impossible to think about the grotesque without noticing other equally vague terms—the carnivalesque and the burlesque. It was during the seventeenth century when the commonly understood meaning of the grotesque shifted again, as illustrated in Kayser’s book with an extract from the 1694 Dictionary of the French Academy: “Figuratively speaking, it signifies silly, bizarre, extravagant.”¹⁹ At the time it was also used as a synonym for ridicule, comique, and burlesque.

During the eighteenth century, the meaning of the term became even more vague and shallow, and the range of synonyms eventually became identical with contemporary usage, as can be seen in the entry from the German-French dictionary from 1771: “Figuratively speaking, grotesque means odd, unnatural, bizarre, strange, funny, ridiculous, caricatural etc.”²⁰ It is thus precisely when the grotesque first becomes the objective of systematic definitions that it loses its former narrow and rather technical meaning.

2. 2 The Grotesque in Visual Arts

The grotesque started as a visual arts term, connected to a certain ornamental style of wall decoration. The representations of the grotesque in the visual arts have changed just as dramatically as those of the literary grotesque, evolving from a quite narrow and well-defined style of ornament to the diverse range of interpretations of the grotesque in contemporary art.

Frances S. Connelly, in her book *The Grotesque in Western Art and Literature*, traces the grotesque chronologically from the 1500s to the present. The beginnings of the grotesque and its presence in Renaissance art have already been discussed in the previous chapter. During the sixteenth century, a new pan-European phenomenon emerged: *mannerism*. This style used the grotesque as “the means by which every convention of representation, style, and taste was interrogated.”²¹ In mannerism, the understanding of the

¹⁸ Kayser 26.

¹⁹ Kayser 26.

²⁰ Kayser 28.

²¹ Connelly 38.

word grotesque becomes much vaguer and less clear, exactly like in literature. The art of mannerism was based on incongruity, ambiguity, and unexpected effects,²² but at the same time grotesque continued to be used as a technical term in decorative arts until the eighteenth century.

Connelly draws an analogy between sixteenth-century mannerism and twentieth-century modernism, as they both “depend a great deal upon grotesque.”²³ There are, of course, many elements of the visual grotesque which could be discussed, but one particularly important for the focus of this thesis is the portrayal of the “carnavalesque body.” It is the tension between high and low which is fundamental in both literary and visual carnivalesque, and out of all the expressions of the grotesque it most frequently operates in the public sphere, with its roots going back to medieval European folk traditions and street theatre. Pieter Bruegel the Elder is mentioned as an example of a visual artist (he was a painter and printmaker) who, just like François Rabelais in the literary sphere, appropriated elements of popular culture and turned them into a fine art tradition.²⁴

The human body itself is a crucial element in all manifestations of the grotesque, and Connelly makes an important point about the visual (like the literary) grotesque being gendered as a binary opposition of the masculine and the feminine. She analyses a coat of arms from the fifteenth-century collection *Master of the Housebook*, which features “a woman on top” (in that particular image she is literally riding on a man’s back), i.e. the grotesque is turning the social and gender hierarchies upside-down.²⁵ The grotesque is by its definition an element threatening the boundaries of the normative and conventional, which are centred around the cultural attributes of the masculine; that makes the grotesque a feminine element. We find parallels in the same feminine-coded attributes in both the visual and literary grotesque—the grotesque is seen as bodied, fertile, earth-bound, and changeful.²⁶

²² Connelly 38.

²³ Connelly 74.

²⁴ Connelly 86.

²⁵ Connelly 86.

²⁶ Connelly 2.

Artists paint distorted and abjected bodies and, just like in grotesque literature, these bodies are gendered female in Western culture. Horace characterises the grotesque as a monstrous woman, and Aristotle advances this argument by saying that a woman's body (without really defining it) is monstrous by nature, describing it as deformed or mutilated, and as a deviation from the normative, i.e. male, body.²⁷

That this category of "abjected" or "monstrous" bodies has been created is just as important for the visual as it is for the literary grotesque, whose protagonists are exactly those who are called "monstrous." Connelly defines them by stating: "Groups or persons can be made monstrous by being cast as boundary creatures, represented as threatening to the norm, whether on the basis of ethnicity, sexual preference, or, most fundamentally, gender."²⁸ Moreover, other elements such as physical or mental disability can be added to the list as threatening the norm. Connelly follows the portrayal of "monstrous women" in works of art as diverse as Peter Paul Rubens' *The Head of Medusa*, Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and Edvard Munch's *Vampire*.

From the end of the nineteenth century onward, these monstrous women were mainly portrayed as prostitutes, the prototypical "women out of place," personifying the fear or anxiety of not only the woman's body, but the woman's sexuality. This is why, after the eighteenth century, visual representations of the demonic are almost exclusively feminine.²⁹

2. 3 The Grotesque in Literature

2. 3. 1 Bakhtin's Notion of the Grotesque

Discussing the grotesque is not possible without Mikhail Bakhtin and especially his book *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin turns to Renaissance grotesque, folk humour, and laughter, an approach that was condemned as archaic by most of his contemporaries. Bakhtin sees the folk culture of the Middle Ages—which draws from the antique tradition of the Saturnalia—as an essential source of carnival culture and carnival laughter,

²⁷ Connelly 116-117.

²⁸ Connelly 116.

²⁹ Connelly 136.

systematising it into three different kinds: ritual spectacles (carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace etc.), comic verbal compositions (oral and written parodies), and various genres of billingsgate (curses, oaths).³⁰ These carnival feasts and activities were, according to Bakhtin, essential because they created a parallel, unofficial, and extra-political culture; the opposite pole to the extremely official and class-structured society. It is precisely the official culture, largely represented by the Church, that pushes all of the aforementioned comic forms to a nonofficial level and automatically considers them “low” genres.

Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, coined the term *grotesque realism*, which he described as a “peculiar aesthetic concept” characteristic of folk culture and for which the material bodily element is crucial.³¹ This bodily element is decidedly positive for Bakhtin, as it is not found in the body of an individual, but in the people, the mass of which is constantly growing and renewed. This grotesque realism was perceived as the opposite of all forms of high culture (both literature and visual arts) because it was rooted in folk culture, bound to the lower bodily stratum. Degradation is a crucial element of the grotesque and it is understood as “lowering of all that is high, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”³²

Bakhtin keeps returning to the motif of “coming down to earth” as a metaphor for the aforementioned degradation, which for him means contact with the reproductive and generating power of the earth and the body at the same time.³³ Degradation is a key term for Bakhtin, as according to him not only parody, but all forms of the grotesque and all forms of laughter degrade, i.e. bring down to earth and turn the subjects of this degradation to flesh; they materialise them. Bakhtin’s grotesque is absolutely unthinkable without the concept of the grotesque body—even though he insists that it is not simply the physical body of an individual, but an entity which transgresses and outgrows its own limits and cannot be separated from the rest of the world,³⁴ the descriptions of this grotesque body are

³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 5.

³¹ Bakhtin 19.

³² Bakhtin 19.

³³ Bakhtin 22.

³⁴ Bakhtin 26.

remarkable because of their openly physical nature.

The Bakhtinian grotesque body is a body in the act of becoming, never finished, never completed, always creating and building. It stems from the folklore and the comic genre, it is a target of common mockery and abuse; it is exaggerated, hyperbolic, and excessive, with convexities and orifices. He even mentions specific bodily parts he considers grotesque: the open mouth, genitalia, the belly, the breasts, and the nose, because these are “the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.”³⁵

Bakhtin is also concerned with bodily processes, listing sexual intercourse, death throes, and the act of birth as “three main acts in the life of the grotesque body.”³⁶ The ambivalence of a body simultaneously dying and giving birth is also fundamentally grotesque, resulting in the concept of *the double body*.³⁷ Bakhtin’s grotesque body is also constructed as a heteronormative binary opposition, with the woman always shown in contrast to her (without an exception, male) partner. “Woman” is shown as the personification of the bodily grotesque itself. As Bakhtin writes: “[Woman] is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum, she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb.”³⁸

This image has to be connected with the notorious mention of “senile pregnant hags who are laughing,” as Bakhtin calls the figurines from the Kerch terracotta collection, seeing it as “a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque” because “It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed.”³⁹ This is a very condensed yet thorough definition of the ultimate possible grotesque for Bakhtin, expressed in the

³⁵ Bakhtin 26.

³⁶ Bakhtin 353.

³⁷ Bakhtin 318.

³⁸ Bakhtin 240.

³⁹ Bakhtin 25-26.

ambivalent, but necessary, combination of life and death, which is especially important in contrast to Kayser's understanding of the grotesque as discussed in the next chapter.

The automatic connection of women with the bodily grotesque—and thus necessarily gendering this grotesque, seeing women as the ones who bring everything to this lower bodily level (especially in the act of giving birth)—is of course a target of feminist critique, represented for example by Mary Russo, whose criticism of the Bakhtinian grotesque body will be discussed in a separate chapter.

Bakhtin frequently criticises Kayser's theory of the grotesque, saying that “in Kayser, there is no room for the material bodily principle.”⁴⁰ For Bakhtin, the true grotesque must necessarily include the grotesque body and its bodily processes, which is not of special interest for Kayser.

2. 3. 2 Kayser's Notion of the Grotesque

Wolfgang Kayser's approach to understanding the grotesque is so different from Bakhtin's that it might be useful to see it as a contrasting position. Kayser studies the grotesque not only in literature, but also in visual (for example in the paintings of Bruegel, Goya, or Bosch) and performing arts (*commedia dell'arte*), aiming to find a common sources and elements of the grotesque. He works with Georg Hegel's definition of the grotesque and, just like Hegel, he emphasises the connection of the grotesque with the “supernatural and extrahuman.”⁴¹ For Kayser, the grotesque takes place on three levels: the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception.⁴² The grotesque is an expression of the human fear that the world ceasing to be reliable and of an individual who is unable to orient themselves in this world which has become alien and absurd.⁴³ The grotesque does not (and does not aim to) offer any meaning or explanation of anything. Kayser turns back to his interpretation of Renaissance grotesques, which are playful, but also “ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Bakhtin 48.

⁴¹ Kayser 102.

⁴² Kayser 180.

⁴³ Kayser 185.

⁴⁴ Kayser 21.

For Kayser, the grotesque “Other” has aspects of “the deformed” as well as “the horrible”; the grotesque itself is then built on the “coexistence of beautiful, bizarre, ghastly, and repulsive elements, the merger of the parts into a turbulent whole, the withdrawal into a phantasmagoric and nocturnal world.”⁴⁵ These are the elements he finds, for example, in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and E. T. A. Hoffmann. Kayser also directly mentions specific forms and motifs that are to be found in the grotesque; such as certain animals (snakes, owls, toads, spiders, vermin, bats), “the plant” or “the jungle,” the fusion of organic and mechanical, masks, the human body reduced to puppets, marionettes and automata, and the encounter with madness.⁴⁶ Even though Kayser constructs the grotesque as a detailed and structured aesthetic category, he also emphasises the fact that the grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception: it is necessarily a culturally determined category.

Kayser in the end interprets the grotesque as “an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world,”⁴⁷ and mentions three historical periods when the power of the grotesque “It” was felt especially strongly: the sixteenth century, the period extending from the Sturm und Drang to Romanticism, and the twentieth century. The twentieth century is especially interesting for Kayser, because he claims that it was the first time when “the grotesque became a source of a certain widespread phenomena,”⁴⁸ and the range of examples of the grotesque in this period is manifold compared to any other, including the sixteenth century mannerism. For Kayser, the grotesque is an expression of the fear of alienation and absurdity of the world which we no longer understand. It is thus a deeply negative phenomenon, one that is most strongly connected with horror. It is indeed a very different grotesque than the bizarre, but playful and joyful, kind described by Bakhtin, which is an openly bodily structure related to laughter and the comic, and ultimately an important regenerative force.

⁴⁵ Kayser 79.

⁴⁶ Kayser 181-184.

⁴⁷ Kayser 188.

⁴⁸ Kayser 130.

2. 3. 3 Feminist Contemporary Critique of the Grotesque, the Carnavalesque, and the Grotesque Body

The aforementioned views on the grotesque, and especially the Bakhtinian grotesque body, are bound to be critiqued and rethought from contemporary points of view, especially from the perspective of feminist and gender theory. The most coherent work on the grotesque and the grotesque body from a feminist perspective is *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* by Mary J. Russo.

In this book, Russo reviews the connection of the grotesque with contemporary feminism, and states that “Feminism in the 1990s has stood increasingly for and with the normal. It is identified with the norm as a prescription of correct, conventional, or moralizing behavior or identity, and with the normal as it is commonly misapprehended as the familiar. (...) it has led to a cultural and political disarticulation of feminism from the strange, the risky, the minoritarian, the excessive, the outlawed, and the alien.”⁴⁹ Feminism has conformed to the mainstream ideas of the “normal” in order to become generally accepted. This approach is called the “normalization of feminism” by Russo, and can also be connected to the frequent critique of mainstream 1990s feminism as a movement excluding women of colour, disabled women, and queer and transgender women, i.e. those not conforming to the Western normative constraint.⁵⁰ The transgressive bodies often considered grotesque, and the grotesque itself, have not been frequent topics of feminism, which thus means the Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque body has not been adequately challenged.

Russo questions the stereotypical association of the grotesque with the “low,” and revisits the “high” registers of modernism and postmodernism using Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* as an example.⁵¹ Russo criticises the archetypal views of the “female” and “male,” prominently present in (not only) Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque and the simplistic associations of the female with the earthly, material, and archaic (summarised in the notorious metaphor of the “grotesque cave”). This view valorises the traditional stereotypes of the earth mother, the crone, the witch, and the vampire, and posits a pseudo-

⁴⁹ Mary J. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995) vii.

⁵⁰ These normative regulations are studied in detail in Chapter 4.

⁵¹ She could have just as well mentioned for example her *The Passion of New Eve*.

natural connection between the so-called female body and the “primal” elements, especially the earth. These archaic tropes and the “literalization of the female body as grotesque”⁵² then offer an easy and acceptable slide from the grotesque abjection to misogyny.⁵³

The very positioning of the grotesque as superficial and “to the margins”⁵⁴ is suggestive of the stereotypical construction of the feminine; the literary theorist Naomi Schor emphasises the link between the feminine and the particular in the historical perspective. According to her, it is the particular that tends to give way to the strange, the peculiar, the monstrous.⁵⁵ Russo follows the classical division of the grotesque into two types: the comic (or the carnivalesque), represented by Bakhtin, and the uncanny, represented by Kayser.⁵⁶

Both of these categories rely heavily on the trope of the body.⁵⁷ Bakhtin’s carnivalesque body is first and foremost the social body, connected to degradation and the lower bodily stratum. The body of the uncanny grotesque is related most strongly to the psychic register with the bodily sphere seen as cultural projection of an inner state.⁵⁸ Kayser is most interested in the topic of alienation, and his work is thus more psychological and less bodily than Bakhtin’s. Russo mentions Sigmund Freud’s obsession with the “female hysteric” as the central figure of psychoanalysis and likens it to the grotesque, which suggests the general position of madness as a grotesque theme: “Madness is typically seen either as acting out of the devalued female role or the total or potential rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype.” To recover from her madness, the woman must “adjust” and accept the “norms for her sex.”⁵⁹

As the grotesque emerges as a deviation from the norm, the female grotesque is

⁵² Russo 3.

⁵³ Russo 2.

⁵⁴ Russo 5.

⁵⁵ Russo 6.

⁵⁶ Russo 7.

⁵⁷ Russo 8.

⁵⁸ Russo 9.

⁵⁹ Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, eds. *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 134.

also always defined against the male norm.⁶⁰ In Russo's study, the female grotesque does not guarantee the presence of women or exclude male bodies or subjectivities, because they are also produced through an association with the feminine as the body marked by difference, an embodiment of the Other.⁶¹ Thus, the only men that can be considered truly grotesque are the ones without the protection of the generic, the men who have been coded as *particular* (considered the Other just like women are): usually queer men and racially or ethnically marked men.⁶² It is thus obvious that the "classical" concept of the grotesque is Western, white-centred, and heteronormative.

A woman is traditionally constructed as a "lack," the negative of the space occupied by the man. Russo criticises Bakhtin's identification of the cave (*grotto*) with the womb and woman-as-mother as regressive⁶³ and agrees with Butler's and Foucault's perspective on the oppositional differentiation of male and female as heterosexually presumed⁶⁴ (required by compulsory heterosexuality). This construction of the female as the negative, the lack, is refused by the feminist concept of "reclaiming space." Russo explicitly mentions Butler and the concept of performativity coined by her and agrees that "performativity is a compulsory practice"⁶⁵—the female subject does not assume her own identity, but this identity is assumed within the compulsory norms of what identity and visibility are.

Russo investigates the carnivalesque from a feminist perspective and states that it is necessarily gendered—"making a spectacle out of oneself" is a specifically feminine danger.⁶⁶ Russo revisits Bakhtin's carnivalesque image of the unruly woman and argues that even though Bakhtin sees the carnival as a radical disruption of the social and class norms, it is essentially a conservative structure.⁶⁷ The despised elements of "strong" (seen as unruly or disorderly) femininity are mocked by cross-dressing men. This very image of

⁶⁰ Russo 11.

⁶¹ Russo 13.

⁶² Russo 13.

⁶³ Russo 29.

⁶⁴ Russo 40.

⁶⁵ Russo 48.

⁶⁶ Russo 53.

⁶⁷ Russo 58.

the carnival thus perpetuates the dominant representation of women by men; the gender differences of the structure of the carnival are apparent.

Russo discusses Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body and states that he "fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relation of gender"⁶⁸ into his study of body politics of the carnival as a historical and social element, which makes his notion of the female grotesque repressed and undeveloped. Bakhtin's grotesque body is notoriously materialised as a "senile, pregnant hag"; in feminist reading, this image is loaded with connotations of fear and loathing around the processes of reproduction and ageing.⁶⁹ Russo mentions "impossible bodies,"⁷⁰ bodies that are not thinkable as "real" and are inherently grotesque—bodies not conforming to the heteronormative and cisnormative framework, just like bodies that are in any way disabled or "deformed" ("freak bodies"). Bodily disability or deformity is frequently represented as an inability to reproduce. In a culture which identifies the body of the mother with the female body, a woman not able (and possibly also not willing) to reproduce is inherently grotesque.⁷¹

These are just the most relevant elements of the grotesque (represented especially by Bakhtin's theoretical thought) that Russo re-examines from a feminist perspective, considering the misogyny inherent within the fact that the feminine is always seen as a lack and something that cannot assume itself. However, she does not deconstruct the biological determinism of Bakhtin's as well as her own theoretical thought; even though she mentions certain constructions of "female bodies" which are seen differently and calls them the "impossible bodies," (queer, disabled, and sterile women) she does not really consider the very constructs of "female" and "male" and their possible disruptions.

⁶⁸ Russo 63.

⁶⁹ Russo 63.

⁷⁰ Russo 106.

⁷¹ Russo 110.

Chapter 3 Is There an “American Grotesque”?

So far, we have studied the origin and the definitions of the grotesque in general, but because the texts analysed in this thesis were written by an American author in an American cultural context, we have to ask if there is something as specific as the “American grotesque” and, if so, what are the common features of this grotesque. The American literary critic Harold Bloom has investigated this question in the collection of essays *The Grotesque* he edited.

The question of culturally specific roots of the grotesque in the American environment is crucial in this collection, especially when we realise that most books focus only on so-called Southern Grotesque, coining it as a specific category (for example, Maria Haar’s book *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Modern Southern Fiction*), even though many of its elements are applicable to the American grotesque in general.

3. 1 Possible Reasons for the Abundance of the Grotesque in American Literature

Schewill attempts to define the sources of the specifically American grotesque in the first essay of *The Grotesque*, “Notes on the Grotesque: Anderson, Brecht and Williams,” by drawing a distinction between the American and the European grotesque. Even though the concept of the grotesque comes originally from Europe, he argues that the American understanding of the grotesque is necessarily different because of the different cultural environment. He sees a clear grotesque tradition in the American literary canon and claims that contemporary books such as Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* follow this great grotesque tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe.⁷²

Bloom emphasises that the grotesque should be considered central to American society⁷³ and Schewill sees two basic sources of this privileged position of the American grotesque: the American evangelical tradition and the goal of individual and material success. Schewill describes the religious environment in the United States as unprecedented because of the evangelical splintering into “hundreds of separatist

⁷² Harold Bloom, ed., *The Grotesque* (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2009) 1.

⁷³ Bloom 11.

movements with the religious intensity of fanaticism.”⁷⁴ The American goal of success is said to create a grotesque ambivalent relationship between abundance and independence.⁷⁵

Schewill mentions the differing developments of European and American grotesque after the Second World War, which was to a great extent responsible for the development of the Epic and Absurdist styles in Europe (e. g. the Epic theatre of Bertold Brecht). He states that the American grotesque cannot be Absurdist because it still flows from the basic American optimism about democracy, religion, and power, conflicting with the increasing pessimism in the country, and that “the American Grotesque still searches for belief in a way that European visions of grotesque have given up.”⁷⁶ When trying to further analyse the American grotesque, most critics focus specifically on Southern authors, most often on Flannery O’Connor and William Faulkner.

3. 2 The Typology of the Grotesque and the Grotesque Characters According to the Analysis of Maria Haar

Maria Haar, in her doctoral thesis *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Modern Southern Fiction: Some Aspects of Its Form and Function*, carries out a detailed analysis of the different subtypes of the grotesque and also of different types of grotesque characters, both of which can be applied outside the literary region of the South. Haar’s observations on the importance of violence and physically and/or mentally disabled characters for the grotesque are especially crucial when reading Oates, who is not a Southern author by any means, although we can see certain similarities in her background and the motifs of her writing (as discussed on page 36).

Haar mentions Louise Gossett, author of the book *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* and Flannery O’Connor scholar, who emphasises the importance of violence for the grotesque. Violence is a crucial element of the grotesque for many authors, including Oates, which is explained by Gossett, as both violence and grotesqueness are

⁷⁴ Bloom 3.

⁷⁵ Bloom 3.

⁷⁶ Bloom 10.

dramatisations of disorder.⁷⁷ This very general notion of violence in the grotesque can be applied to many contemporary authors, and is not limited to the South.

Haar distinguishes several types of grotesque: the bodily abnormal grotesque, the macabre grotesque, the repulsive and/or frightening grotesque, and the comic grotesque. It is necessary to realise that the types of grotesque are dependent on their grotesque characters; many of these characters will occupy several types at once, change from one category to another, or even cease to be grotesque altogether.⁷⁸ The grotesque characters are differentiated according to their “abnormality”—they are grotesque due to their physical deformity (their grotesque bodies), mental disability or disorder, or some combination of the two. The characters are then further distinguished into those who are disabled from birth and those whose disability or abnormality developed later in life. A possible third category is also the grotesque repulsion or fear caused by characters with “deviant” sexual behaviour.

All of these categories can be seen in Oates’ grotesque characters as analysed later in this thesis. The common element of both the bodily deformed and the mentally disabled grotesque characters is that they “induce feelings of fear and repulsion intermingled with amusement.”⁷⁹ It is exactly this clashing combination of the comic and the repulsive—the unresolved conflict—that makes them grotesque, because as Haar herself points out, not every handicapped character is necessarily grotesque.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Maria Haar, *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Modern Southern Fiction: Some Aspects of Its Form and Function* (Umeå: Universitetet i Umeå, 1983) 11.

⁷⁸ Haar 206.

⁷⁹ Haar 91.

⁸⁰ Haar 38.

Chapter 4 Thinking Gender

Gender is a category indisputably present in the short stories of Joyce Carol Oates, and it has the role of a structural element assigning the power relationships between characters, similar to, for example, race or class elsewhere. Gender is also necessarily connected to the grotesque, as has been proved by Russo's analysis of Bakhtin.⁸¹

To be able to correctly recognise and examine the importance of gendered elements in the texts (such as gender roles, stereotypes, the characters or behaviour transgressing the normative gender framework, and gendered violence) it is necessary to first understand how gender is constructed and perpetuated by society. This has been most coherently defined in the concept of gender performativity, coined by Judith Butler, the very basis of which can be partly found in the scholarship of Simone de Beauvoir. Also essential is the establishment of the inseparable relation between the normative gender intelligibility and compulsory heterosexuality, defined especially by Michel Foucault and Monique Wittig.

4. 1 Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a Foundation of the Performative Theory of Gender

Thinking gender as a social and political category would not be possible without the controversial scholarship of Simone de Beauvoir. Even though most of her work is unusable for our purposes and often in direct contradiction with the analysis carried out in this thesis, it is still essential to acknowledge Beauvoir's importance in creating the basis for the later performative theory of gender. One of the problems of reading Beauvoir, in addition to the theoretical problems analysed in the following two paragraphs, is that the language and terminology used in her work are necessarily limited to the terms available to her in 1949. As the translators' note in the 2010 revised edition of *The Second Sex* reminds us, the age of the publication and the translators' decision not to modernise Beauvoir's language for example precluded the usage of the word "gender."⁸²

The biggest problem in accepting Beauvoir is her biological determinism with which she explains the concepts of "femaleness," "femininity," and "sex" (gender),

⁸¹ Discussed in the Chapter 2. 3. 3 (page 20).

⁸² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 2010) 17.

together with an outdated class reading of the position of women. Her theory is not widely applicable, because she very often offers statements without explanation; furthermore, she builds her whole concepts on these statements masked as “truth.” In the introductory part of *The Second Sex* she states, “everyone agrees that there are females in the human species”⁸³ without defining the more or less falsely biological grounds she is apparently using as the basis of her statement. Beauvoir says “no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex,”⁸⁴ right before famously asking “what is a woman?”⁸⁵

These discrepancies between the given (and as such, not explained or defined) and the constructed complicate deeper analysis of Beauvoir’s views on gender throughout her work. These views seem to be ambivalent, but always come back to the cisnormative binary determinism of the first part of her work (called “Facts and Myths”), where she asserts that “the division of the sexes is a biological given”⁸⁶ and the fundamental unit of society is the “couple with the two halves riveted to each other: cleavage of society by sex is not possible.”⁸⁷ This lack of clarity then makes understanding Beauvoir’s proposed distinction of “femaleness” and “femininity” particularly difficult. On one hand, she claims that every human being is always uniquely situated, refusing the notion of the “eternal feminine” stereotype;⁸⁸ on the other, she uses empty phrases that can be easily read as transphobic about “women who assert they are men”⁸⁹ to state her point.

What is important for the connection of gender and the grotesque is Beauvoir’s understanding of the man as the norm; in her words “the man represents both the positive and the neuter.”⁹⁰ Woman⁹¹ is thus defined as the negative, the Other, exactly aligning with the image of the female grotesque (or the grotesque female) discussed in the previous

⁸³ Beauvoir 23.

⁸⁴ Beauvoir 24.

⁸⁵ Beauvoir 25.

⁸⁶ Beauvoir 28.

⁸⁷ Beauvoir 29.

⁸⁸ Beauvoir 24.

⁸⁹ Beauvoir 24.

⁹⁰ Beauvoir 25.

⁹¹ The word *woman* without an article is used in the new revised edition of *The Second Sex* to align with Beauvoir’s particular usage of *la femme* and *femme* in the French original (Beauvoir 17).

chapters. Woman can be only defined in relation to man, not in herself; she is not considered an autonomous being.⁹² It is never the Other (in this case woman) that posits the One (man); the Other is posited as the Other by the One positing *itself* as the One.⁹³ This gendered distinction is thus fundamentally unequal.

In the second chapter (“Destiny”), Beauvoir once again tries to find the reasons for this division resulting in oppression of women in biological data—a direction that is now generally considered ambiguous and unproductive. Despite Beauvoir’s fixation on biological determinism and reproduction as the key distinctive mechanisms of gender, she also says that “The female is a woman, insofar as she feels herself as such. Some essential biological givens are not part of her lived situation: for example, the structure of the ovum is not reflected in it.”⁹⁴

She at least partly acknowledges that gender is not a “biological truth” when she sets aside human beings as a different category than animals, stating “humanity is not an animal species: it is a historical reality.”⁹⁵ She adds that women as a category only exist in economic and social contexts, equating the two sexes she recognises to two classes.⁹⁶ She likens the position of women to “the black soul” or “the Jewish character” as all of them embody the Other and are assigned inferior positions.⁹⁷ The important quality of women as the Other is the fact that they have never posited themselves as Subjects.⁹⁸ Because women have always been defined only in relation to men, they could not become autonomous Subjects. This also means that women as the Other are defined according to however men, as the One, choose to define themselves.

The most famous and widely quoted statement by Beauvoir reads as follows: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society.”⁹⁹ The problem is that even

⁹² Beauvoir 26.

⁹³ Beauvoir 27 (own emphasis).

⁹⁴ Beauvoir 73.

⁹⁵ Beauvoir 87.

⁹⁶ Beauvoir 88.

⁹⁷ Beauvoir 32.

⁹⁸ Beauvoir 196.

⁹⁹ Beauvoir 330.

though Beauvoir claims that no biological destiny defines the woman's role in society, she still mentions sexually differentiated "human females" (which she later specifies to be differentiated by their genitalia). It is thus not possible to adopt her cisnormative binary determinism of gender differentiation, and it is then a great question if it is possible to only accept the second part of her statement, i.e. that an individual "becomes" a woman in the performative point of view. The individual becomes woman through constant oppression from the regulatory norms of the society; becomes posited as the Other. This view on *becoming* a certain gender would correspond with Butler's theory of gender performativity as discussed in the next chapter.

Even though Beauvoir's work is biased by the aforementioned biological determinism, uncritical following of psychoanalysis, and outdated views on women from the class perspective, many concepts can be adopted to support the theory of construction of gender as the construction of the Other and the importance of gender in the grotesque. She writes about women and girls being encouraged to make themselves objects¹⁰⁰ for the gaze of others; the objectification of their bodies then prevents them from becoming autonomous subjects. Beauvoir also makes a very interesting point when she mentions that violence is not permitted to women¹⁰¹ as violence and gendered violence especially is fundamental for the grotesque writing of Joyce Carol Oates.

4. 2 (Un)Doing Gender: Gendering the Body According to Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity

Judith Butler's theoretical work on gender has influenced most of the contemporary gender theorists and has also been the major source of the understanding of gender in this thesis. Unlike Beauvoir, Butler does not resign herself to trying to define gender on questionable grounds of biological determinism and attempts to transcend the normative binary dichotomy (especially in her last book focused on gender published in 2004, *Undoing Gender*). Undoubtedly, there are also problematically cisnormative sections in her work, especially in her explanation of drag, but they do not bias the fundamental structure of her understanding of gender. Furthermore, Butler's views on normative and non-normative

¹⁰⁰ Beauvoir 369.

¹⁰¹ Beauvoir 397.

bodies will be fundamental for understanding the gendered grotesque and grotesque bodies discussed in the following chapter.

Butler defines the category of women as created by power operating in binary frame¹⁰² (combined with the compulsory heterosexuality) and states that because gendered subjects are created by the power system, their emancipation cannot be sought through the same system. Her perspective on gender is intersectional, i.e. gender is not constructed consistently in different historical contexts, and so it is impossible to separate out gender from the also discursively constructed identities of race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality¹⁰³ (to which we also need to add the category of disability and able-bodiedness). Butler refuses the common misconception of gender as a “cultural interpretation” of sex,¹⁰⁴ because just like gender, sex is culturally constructed and inscribed (forced) on anatomically differentiated bodies. The construction of gendered bodies happens through a series of exclusions and denials.¹⁰⁵

This inscription functions according to binary norms and thus problematises and erases the non-normative bodies (for example, of intersex individuals or those with disabilities), singling them out as the Other, just like the culturally normative matrix erases so-called “unintelligible genders”—those independent of the binary opposition. This theory is supported by Michel Foucault, who says that “the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations.”¹⁰⁶ For Foucault, it is only through determination within a discourse that a body becomes sexed.¹⁰⁷ Unintelligible bodies expose these regulative strategies of sexual categorisation.¹⁰⁸

Butler bases her theory directly on Beauvoir’s statement that one becomes a woman, and adds that she does so “always under a cultural compulsion to become one.”¹⁰⁹ The theory of performativity states that “gender is performatively produced and compelled

¹⁰² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990) viii.

¹⁰³ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 3.

¹⁰⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 7.

¹⁰⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 135.

¹⁰⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 92.

¹⁰⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 92.

¹⁰⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 96.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 8.

by the regulatory practices of gender coherence,”¹¹⁰ which also means that gender identity is performatively constituted by the expressions of gender—the very expressions which are usually said to be its results.¹¹¹

For both Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig, it is only the female sex that is marked (and thus considered the Other); the male sex is not. This binary perspective of women existing only in relation to men has been notoriously summarised by Wittig: “Just as there are no slaves without masters, there are no women without men.”¹¹² Wittig also does not see any distinction between sex and gender, and she claims that the terms “masculine,” “feminine,” “male,” and “female” only exist within the heterosexual matrix (for which Wittig coins the term “heterosexual contract”), setting aside the lesbian as neither female nor male.

The effect of an “internal substance” of gender on the surface of the body is produced performatively, through discursive acts, gestures, and desire.¹¹³ As mentioned above, doing gender through performance is intertwined with inevitable social and cultural punishment for those who “fail to do their gender right”¹¹⁴—those who do not perform their gender according to the restricting culturally intelligible practices of identity.¹¹⁵ The performance of gender has to be repeated, like any other social act, i.e. gender is an identity constituted in time in a particular cultural and social context.

In her second book focusing on gender, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler becomes more specific about the performative theory of gender and disproves the popular misunderstanding that gender performativity is an act of free will where an individual brings into being what they name. It is quite the opposite, as the phenomenon of gender is produced, regulated, and constrained by the power of discourse which represents a set of cultural norms.¹¹⁶ In other words, the body is sexed by the force of abjection and

¹¹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 24.

¹¹¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 25.

¹¹² Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 15.

¹¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 136.

¹¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 140.

¹¹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 145.

¹¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 2011) xii.

exclusion;¹¹⁷ gender is always constructed through exclusionary means. Construction, as a process happening in time, thus operates through forced reiteration of norms. Through this process not only certain genders, but also certain bodies, are excluded, delegitimated, and pathologised. These unintelligible bodies will be discussed in the following chapter.

Butler defines gender as a historical category and emphasises that terms such as “anatomy” and “sex” are unthinkable without their cultural framing and history.¹¹⁸ The question of normatively enforced gender is the question of who is considered human and who and what is considered real and true. Butler agrees with Foucault that this question is not as much a matter of knowledge as it is a matter of power,¹¹⁹ because “to be called unreal is one way in which one can be oppressed.”¹²⁰ It is also the restrictive discourse on gender insisting on the binary of man and woman that performs a regulatory operation of power and reinforces the normative restrictions.¹²¹

It is essential not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalised, and reinforced, but also to recognise the instances where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, and where the coherence and invariability of its categories is questioned.¹²²

4. 3 The Importance of the Gendered Body: Illegible and Inhuman Bodies and the Violence Against Them

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the performative theory of gender aligns with the various concepts of the grotesque Other in the way that it creates unintelligible bodies which are excluded from the protection of the normative. Just like Foucault talks about illegitimate sexualities oppressed by the “triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence,”¹²³ there are also illegitimate genders, and illegitimate bodies: those transgressing

¹¹⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter* xiii.

¹¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 9.

¹¹⁹ Butler, *Undoing Gender* 27.

¹²⁰ Butler, *Undoing Gender* 30.

¹²¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender* 43.

¹²² Butler, *Undoing Gender* 216.

¹²³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978) 5.

the normative framework. Foucault names forms through which power is exercised as prohibition, censorship, and denial, while Butler talks about exclusion, abjection, and invisibility; in any case, it is apparent that illegitimate bodies are dehumanised and pushed away as the Other. Power always employs the law of prohibition and the inevitable punishment for difference is nonexistence.¹²⁴

Foucault focuses mostly on the exclusion of bodies with non-normative sexuality (sexual orientation or desire), but his conclusions are widely applicable to any other kind of exclusion (gender, disability, race). He coins the term “politics of sex,” which is society’s way of combining disciplinary techniques with regulative methods.¹²⁵ It is through sex that each individual “has to pass in order to have access to his [sic] own intelligibility.”¹²⁶

This perspective aligns with Butler’s aforementioned definition of which identities are excluded as unintelligible and said not to exist—those in which gender does not follow from sex, and those in which the practices of desire do not follow from either sex or gender. Because these identities do not conform to the norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear as “developmental failures” or “logical impossibilities” within that perspective.¹²⁷ This means that the unintelligible and transgressive identities are all those not conforming to the hetero- and cisnormative matrix. But at this point we are also talking about bodies, because bodies are only considered intelligible bodies—and the people possessing those bodies are only seen as people—when they are gendered in conformity with the binary norm.¹²⁸

The boundaries of the body are the lived experience of differentiation; the differentiation is never neutral to the question of gender difference or the heterosexual matrix,¹²⁹ and the conformity of the idealised bodies is controlled by gaze.¹³⁰ The

¹²⁴ Foucault 84.

¹²⁵ Foucault 146.

¹²⁶ Foucault 155.

¹²⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 17.

¹²⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble* 17.

¹²⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 35.

¹³⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 45.

materiality of the body itself is an effect of power and it is not thinkable without gender as its normative constraint.

Butler, however, also explicitly mentions bodies which are excluded as unintelligible and delegitimated: “disability politics, but also the intersex and transgendered [sic] movements contest forcibly imposed ideals of what bodies ought to be like.”¹³¹ The intersex body implicitly exposes the regulative strategies of sexual categorisation¹³² and so it has to be pathologised. This pathologisation of transgressive bodies is seen in practice in the forceful medical “normalisation” of the bodies of intersex children. The bodies transgressing the norms of cultural intelligibility do not enjoy the protection of being human; they are dehumanised, called unreal and nonexistent, and often exposed to violence. This violence goes largely unpunished in society, as violence on subjects who are not deemed human is not seen as breaking the social contract. The violence against the transgressing bodies emerges from a need to keep the order of normative bodies and binary construction of gender. Violence thus becomes a response to the Other, and the whole question of the Other becomes a question of who counts as a person.¹³³

The question of which identities are deemed real and which are not is just as deeply rooted in thinking gender as it is in thinking the grotesque. This is because “being called real or being called unreal can be not only a means of social control but a form of dehumanizing violence. (...) to be called unreal, and to have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against which the human is made. It is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality.”¹³⁴ When Butler states “the derealization of gendered violence has implications for understanding how and why certain gender presentations are criminalized and pathologized, how subjects who cross gender risk internment and imprisonment, why violence against transgendered [sic] subjects is not

¹³¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender* 28.

¹³² Butler, *Gender Trouble* 96.

¹³³ Butler, *Undoing Gender* 58.

¹³⁴ Butler, *Undoing Gender* 217.

recognized as violence,”¹³⁵ she is talking about transgender subjects just as she is talking about other subjects who have been commonly considered grotesque—intersex individuals, those who express other than heterosexual desire, and the physically and/or mentally disabled. All of these lack the protection of being seen as human.

It is now apparent that the aforementioned typology of the grotesque characters coined by Haar can be rethought according to the performative theory. Those who transgress the normative framework—i.e. transgender and intersex individuals, the physically and/or mentally disabled, and the bi- and homosexual—become inherently grotesque and often seen as repulsive precisely because they are not considered human. Just like the concept of the grotesque itself, they embody the Other, the inhuman, the transgressive.

¹³⁵ Butler, *Undoing Gender* 218.

Chapter 5 Grotesque Elements in Joyce Carol Oates' Short Stories

Joyce Carol Oates is an author very strongly connected to the grotesque as well as to violence—the apparent entwining of the two will be immensely important for the analysis of the selected short stories in the following chapters. Violence is a reoccurring theme of Oates' short stories as well as her novels, and what is essential for the objective of this thesis is that the violence described by her is necessarily gendered. Oates herself comments on being frequently asked why her writing is so violent, and points out that this question is always inherently sexist,¹³⁶ alluding to Beauvoir's aforementioned statement that violence is not allowed to women.¹³⁷ Writing about murder and rape falls within the exclusive sphere of the male writer, just as they generally fall within the exclusive sphere of male action;¹³⁸ if a woman decides to write about these themes, she is automatically considered to be a victim herself and asked if she had an unhappy childhood.

Oates and her writing have been frequent targets of feminist critique that focuses on her depiction of women as victims of violence. These women are seen as unliberated victims by the feminist discourse; their identities as created solely by the male definitions of womanhood.¹³⁹ This is unarguably true and it is also why I consider it essential to examine the stories and protagonists which differ from this normative framework. Oates' short stories are feminist exactly because they permit women to become the perpetrators of violence, breaking even one of the strongest taboos of sexism: portraying a mother who wants to leave her baby whom she ultimately kills (in the short story "Extenuating Circumstances"). Portraying this woman as a person instead of only the archetypal Mother is a feminist decision, and the discourse of seeing women as just as human as men—instead of portraying them as the mysterious Other limited by their assigned gender—also requires the portrayal of women murderers and women rapists.

This discourse of violence is exactly where the transgressions from the norm come into play again. The majority of the perpetrators of violence in Oates' writing are indeed

¹³⁶ Joyce Carol Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?" *New York Times* 29 March 1981 via <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/05/specials/oates-violent.html>>.

¹³⁷ When Oates says that writing about war, rape, and murder is not permitted to a woman writer.

¹³⁸ Oates, "Why Is Your Writing So Violent?"

¹³⁹ Elizabeth MacInnes De Nittis, "Gender and the Grotesque in the Short Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates" (University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2008) 2.

men (as for example in the famous short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”), but we also find stories where brutal violence is carried out by women aggressors. Three of the analysed short stories were chosen because the perpetrator of violence—in all of these particular stories it is murder—is a woman (namely in “Haunted,” “The Premonition,” and “Extenuating Circumstances”). The story “Heat” was chosen to represent another type of grotesque violence, already mentioned by Haar, i. e. where the perpetrator is a man, but a physically and/or mentally disabled man. In this case, the gender of the perpetrator intersects with other elements (here it is disability) so he is no longer protected by his gender. He is othered, excluded from the norm, and becomes a grotesque character.

There are, of course, many other stories that could have been chosen to illustrate the importance of the grotesque in Joyce Carol Oates’ short stories,¹⁴⁰ but I believe that the selection proposed in this thesis allows us to explore the diversity of the grotesque, while focusing on gender as its primary tool and the theme of gendered violence present in all of the selected stories. The stories will be subsequently compared to each other and to the first story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” which is used as an example of the normative view on gendered violence. In this way we can examine what part gender plays in connection to male and female grotesque characters as the perpetrators of violence, and how gender roles and stereotypes affect the grotesque.

5. 1 “Don’t you know who I am?”¹⁴¹—Grotesque Masculinity and the Feminine Victim in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

One of the most famous and certainly most frequently anthologised works by Oates, the short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, is very often considered the prime example of the grotesque in her writing. It is also a story that is directly built on gender—its structure would probably not work without the gender differentiation and the presented very definite gender stereotypes. After all, the entire story is formed by the male gaze the grotesque protagonist Arnold Friend forces on Connie. “Where Are You Going,

¹⁴⁰ Such as “The Guilty Party,” “The Bingo Master,” “The Doll,” “Naked,” “Martyrdom,” or “Phase Change.”

¹⁴¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? Stories of Young America* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1974) 27.

Where Have You Been?" can be read as a twisted coming-of-age story, because Connie does not become her own Subject; all she ever becomes is Arnold Friend's ideal of womanhood: a passive victim. The passivity and objectification of Connie, together with Arnold Friend as a hyper-masculine predator, is a necessary element of the entire structure of gendered violence in the story.

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is often read on a very symbolic level, where Arnold Friend is seen as Satan¹⁴² or a Satyr.¹⁴³ While there are certainly many symbolic elements (like Friend's peculiar appearance or the fact he knows Connie's name and details about her family), these readings which do not discuss gender cannot truly explain the dynamics of the story. Even though Connie is considered to be the protagonist, her individuality is not at all shown in the story—she is supposed to be an obedient and passive victim. This is apparent when Arnold Friend says to her: "What else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in."¹⁴⁴ Connie, as the Subject, does not exist in the story; she is the personification of the female victim who is about to be dominated. The understanding of Connie as the generic female object is absolutely clear at the beginning of the last paragraph of the story: "'My sweet little blue-eyed girl,' he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes."¹⁴⁵

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is unarguably a grotesque story, but it is a question: to what extent is Arnold Friend truly a grotesque character? He is considered as such, because he is *described* in a very grotesque manner—he has "shaggy black hair that looked as a wig," stuffs his boots so he appears taller, wears mirrored sunglasses, speaks in slang and uses pop-music references, and drives a gold car with mysterious numbers written on it. Arnold Friend is definitely wearing a mask; even his surname is a mask. There is nothing certain about him, except that he is not who he pretends to be: a stereotypical teenage anti-hero.

The most distressing fact about Arnold Friend is that he tries to appear younger than he really is. He wears fashionable clothes and speaks in teenage slang, but there is

¹⁴² Marie Mitchell Olesen Urbanski, "Existential Allegory: Joyce Carol Oates's Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" *Studies in Short Fiction* 15, 1978: 200.

¹⁴³ Joan Easterly, "The Shadow Of A Satyr In Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 27.4, 1990: 537.

¹⁴⁴ Oates, Where Are You Going... 30.

¹⁴⁵ Oates, Where Are You Going... 31.

something disquieting about him. It is Arnold's car that first reveals to Connie that not everything is as it seems: "And up at the front fender was an expression that was familiar — MAN THE FLYING SAUCERS. It was an expression kids had used the year before but didn't use this year."¹⁴⁶ Connie seems to understand the severity of the situation, when she realises that both Arnold and Ellie are much older than they pretend to be, at least thirty. Even though Friend is presented as a representation of hyperbolic masculinity and the story can be read as a grotesque exaggeration of the male-female dating ritual,¹⁴⁷ the very structure of the story follows the normative construction of gendered violence, no matter how many symbols we can find in the narrative. It is a story of a predatory adult man taking advantage of a young girl, even though Arnold Friend himself tries to construct an illusion of seduction by a teenage lover.

Connie is a teenager, she is in the phase of *becoming* (which is according to Bakhtin inherently grotesque¹⁴⁸)—supposedly becoming her own person and creating her identity, but her identity has already been created for her. She is described as a stereotype rather than an individual character; hyper-aware of her appearance, desiring attention from others, and always comparing herself to her sister June. Connie and June are both personifications of a certain prescribed heteronormative ideal of womanhood as passivity and objectification.

Even though Connie's identity is described mostly through her looks and the pop-culture she surrounds herself with (music, fast food restaurants, movie theatres), she loses all of her autonomy and selfhood toward the end of the story and becomes a victim of male desire and domination.¹⁴⁹ She seems to understand it herself when she accepts she will never see her family again, and does not feel fear anymore, only emptiness¹⁵⁰—her own words are the proof that she knows (maybe for the first time in her life) that she is not an autonomous subject and that her identity is reduced to her body: "She felt her pounding heart. (...) She thought for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers, that

¹⁴⁶ Oates, *Where Are You Going...* 21.

¹⁴⁷ De Nittis 15.

¹⁴⁸ De Nittis 13.

¹⁴⁹ De Nittis 16.

¹⁵⁰ Oates, *Where Are You Going...* 29.

belonged to her, but just a pounding, living thing inside this body that wasn't really hers either."¹⁵¹

The story is definitely grotesque in the Kayserian sense of the familiar world becoming alien, the most comfortable details of everyday life suddenly becoming threatening.¹⁵² Arnold Friend is the alien, the transgressive, bringing sudden tragedy to the everyday world of popular teenage music and shopping plazas. But when we look under his odd appearance, ambiguous remarks, and the symbols surrounding him, all that is left is a rather ordinary male predator.

An interesting detail to add to the picture of Arnold Friend is that Oates confirmed that he was inspired by the real American murderer Charles Schmid.¹⁵³ Schmid was convicted of murdering three teenage girls, one of them his girlfriend. Just like Arnold Friend, Schmid pretended to be younger than he really was so he could befriend and date teenagers; he also dyed his hair, wore pancake makeup, and was "so conscious of his height that he stuffed rags, cans and cardboard in his boots to make him taller."¹⁵⁴ If we choose to consider this fact as important, we will realise that the grotesque image of Arnold Friend ironically mirrors reality in the most literal sense.

In this light Arnold Friend's question, "Don't you know who I am?"¹⁵⁵ may imply not only evil as such, as Marie Urbanski suggests in her analysis,¹⁵⁶ but rather the gendered notion of the male perpetrator of violence. For Connie, it is apparently her first (and arguably last) encounter with gendered violence and victimisation directed at her, but for women as a group (and the female as the generic) it is an inevitable and reoccurring reality. In this sense, Arnold Friend is a personification of the very norm of violence.

¹⁵¹ Oates, *Where Are You Going...* 30.

¹⁵² Joyce M. Wegs, "Don't You Know Who I Am?": The Grotesque in Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* Vol. 5, No. 1, January 1975: 66-72.

¹⁵³ De Nittis 13.

¹⁵⁴ William J. Schafer, "Murder in the Desert," *Arizona Attorney* September 2008: 29.

¹⁵⁵ Oates, *Where Are You Going...* 27.

¹⁵⁶ Urbanski 201.

5. 2 “You have power over others you don't realize until you test it”¹⁵⁷—The Mentally Disabled Murderer in “Heat”

While the perpetrator of violence in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is definitely strange in both his looks and behaviour, he is still more or less aligned with the masculine notion of the norm. Arnold Friend is the stereotype whom we may very well expect as a rapist and murderer. This notion changes abruptly in the short story “Heat”; even though the murderer is also male, everything else is very different from the first story.

Roger Whipple, who is convicted of murdering eleven-year-old twins Rhea and Rhoda, is a nineteen-year-old man, but because of his mental disability, he is mentally forever a child, as we are explicitly told by the narrator: “He was happy with children that age, he was that age himself in his head — sixth-grade learning abilities.”¹⁵⁸

Just like “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, “Heat” is also first and foremost a story about power, just like the whole structural notion of violence depends on power. Roger’s father Mr. Whipple “started in early disciplining him [Roger] the way you might discipline a big dog or a horse. Not letting the creature know he has any power to be himself exactly. Not giving him the opportunity to test his will.”¹⁵⁹ Because of his mental disability, Roger is refused any free will and power—his brothers use him to work and children tease him. As a mentally disabled individual, he evokes repulsion, just like Haar suggests in her typology of grotesque characters. At the beginning of the story, most characters feel mostly contempt—stemming from the grotesque repulsion and masked as sympathy—towards him, which changes into fear after he is accused of the murders.

It is essential to realise that in the case of Roger Whipple, his gender does not protect him in the way it protects Arnold Friend. Even in carrying out the murders themselves, Roger is denied any power and agency of his own; the nameless narrator agrees with Roger’s mother Mrs. Whipple that “none of it was his fault in his heart (...) whatever happened it must have been those girls teasing him; everybody knew what the Kunkel twins were like. (...) something must have snapped that day, that was all.”¹⁶⁰ No

¹⁵⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, *Heat & Other Stories*, (New York: Plume, 1992) 145.

¹⁵⁸ Oates, *Heat & Other Stories* 144.

¹⁵⁹ Oates, *Heat & Other Stories* 144.

¹⁶⁰ Oates, *Heat & Other Stories* 151.

one thinks that Roger could have planned the murders or would be able to. Roger Whipple is also consistently referred to as a “boy;” he is seen on the same level as the eleven-year-old girls he murders. The way Roger’s mental disability degrades him to a child contributes to the grotesque present in the story.

“Heat” is a grotesque story on several levels. It certainly does have a grotesque protagonist neatly fitting into Haar’s typology—a mentally disabled man, who is strong and attractive, not othered as physically different, but nevertheless representing the transgressive, the non-normative, the grotesque. But the entire view of the brutal violence carried out in the story is grotesque—even though it is clearly stated that Roger Whipple raped and murdered Rhea and Rhonda, the children are actually blamed for their own murders multiple times throughout the story; they were too loud, liked to tease other children and Roger, and they had stolen six dollars from their grandmother earlier that day.

The way Rhea and Rhonda are victimised for their own deaths is strikingly suggestive of Arnold Friend telling Connie that if she had not touched the telephone, he would not have come inside the house. If Connie had not seen Friend at the fast food restaurant parking lot, if she had not stayed at home alone, if she had not been so concerned with her looks and boys’ attention, she could have possibly lived. The comparison of the two stories shows that the structure of violence taking place in them is nearly identical.

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” has been frequently read as a sinister variation of the girl-becoming-a-woman story and heteronormative dating expectations,¹⁶¹ while “Heat” is much more difficult to read in any consistent way because the protagonist is mentally disabled (and thus already becoming grotesque by not embodying the norm and by being marked by difference) and his victims are much younger. In the case of Roger Whipple, the violence is much less clear (and so more alien and repulsive in the grotesque sense), but in the end, both stories describe young girls (Rhea and Rhonda in “Heat” can certainly be perceived as children) as victims of older men. The main difference is that unlike Arnold Friend, Roger Whipple does not enjoy the full social protection of his gender, because it intersects with his mental disability; while

¹⁶¹ De Nittis 16.

Arnold Friend is depicted as the hyper-masculine stereotype, Roger Whipple is not masculine enough to be a “real man.”

5. 3 “You never knew who you might meet up with”¹⁶²—The Grotesque Female Murderer in “Haunted”

“Haunted” is a short story which is in many aspects comparable to both previous stories, especially to “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, but with one crucial difference. Melissa’s and Mary Lou’s predator is female and it is apparent throughout the narrative that such a notion is so inherently grotesque that neither the girls nor the community can conceive of it. Everyone expects a potential perpetrator of violence to be male, in compliance with the stereotypical gender role assignment; Melissa’s mother even explicitly warns her about it, when she tells Melissa not to go inside abandoned buildings: “you never knew who you might meet up with in an old house or barn that’s supposed to be empty (...) It could be a bum, or it could be someone you know. A man, or a boy...”¹⁶³

It is clear that gendered violence is understood as a reality of life by the community, and it is emphasised even more when we are told how the house where the assault of Melissa and the murder of Mary Lou take place became abandoned; Mr. Minton had beaten his wife to death there and afterward killed himself with a shotgun. And it is precisely this house with the history of very clearly gendered violence and female victimisation to which Melissa and Mary Lou feel attracted, and even though they are scared, they want to explore it. It seems to be significant that the violence takes place in this very house which can be seen as a symbol of extreme gendered violence against women.

The main characters of “Haunted,” Melissa and Mary Lou, are twelve and thirteen years old, and just like Connie in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, they are in the process of *becoming* and entering sexual maturity. But the girls are very different from each other: Mary Lou is ten months older than Melissa and she wants to appear even older; she imitates older girls from town in the way she speaks, gets a boyfriend, and just like Connie, she is very aware of her attractive looks, and the attention she gets from older

¹⁶² Joyce Carol Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, (New York: Plume, 1995) 4.

¹⁶³ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 4.

men. Melissa is jealous of Mary Lou because Mary Lou is more attractive, but also seems to sense certain danger in becoming older and more mature when she says: “It was a habit of childhood—pretending I was younger, more childish, than in fact I was.”¹⁶⁴ Melissa is still a child, while Mary Lou is becoming a woman; ultimately, it is Mary Lou who dies, and Melissa who lives. Melissa avoids the assigned gender role by staying in the position of a child, intuitively understanding it as a safer place.

Not only does Melissa’s mother not want her daughter to be friends with Mary Lou, she disdains Mary Lou as “white trash” for both her sexual maturity and lower class standing. After discovering her relationship with Hans, Mary Lou’s father humiliates her exactly in the same way, “asking her every kind of nasty question then interrupting her and not believing her anyway, then he’d put her to terrible shame by going over to see Hans and carrying on with him.”¹⁶⁵ After Mary Lou’s body is found, Melissa’s mother even blames her for her own murder, just like Mrs. Whipple blames Rhea and Rhonda for their deaths, when she says to Melissa: “Mary Lou shouldn’t have gone with boys, not a nasty boy like Hans, she shouldn’t have been sneaking around the way she did—I knew that didn’t I?”¹⁶⁶ Mary Lou is blamed for her death because she does not respect the confines of the gender role assigned to her, i.e. she is not passive.

Similar to Connie, Melissa and Mary Lou wander where they should not—only it is not a seemingly innocent fast-food restaurant, but a long-abandoned decrepit house and barn. Just like in the previous stories, we encounter a peculiar understanding of blame: Melissa and Mary Lou believe that the unexpected death of their teacher Mrs. Harding is their fault for having called her names; they say “That was because of us, wasn’t it!...what happened to that old bag Harding. But we won’t tell anybody.”¹⁶⁷ They blame themselves, and they also claim to have power to cause Mrs. Harding’s death. Just like Connie is blamed by Arnold Friend for first looking at him at the shopping plaza parking lot and then coming out of the house and thus “inviting him,” Melissa and Mary Lou are blamed for trespassing for which they have to be punished; Melissa is whipped with the willow switch

¹⁶⁴ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 3.

¹⁶⁵ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 15.

¹⁶⁶ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 24.

¹⁶⁷ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 5.

she symbolically brings herself.

Not only is the very idea of the murderer being a woman grotesque, thus transgressing the norms of violence expected by the community (i.e. female victimisation), the murderer is also *described* in a way that precisely recalls the Bakhtinian bodily grotesque. The murderer's big body spreads towards the peripheries and Melissa is disturbed by the sight of her: "I had never seen anyone like her before—her thighs were enormous, big as my body. There was a ring of loose soft flesh at the waistband of her trousers, but she wasn't fat."¹⁶⁸ The gendered language of the description is also very important as it portrays the woman as half stereotypically male-presenting, half grotesquely female; "she wore men's clothes and was as tall as any man (...) her thick wiry gray hair was cut short as a man's,"¹⁶⁹ but her most distinct feature are "big sagging breasts like cows' udders loose inside her shirt,"¹⁷⁰ instantly reminiscent of the Bakhtin's image of "old, pregnant hags" and his focus on the bodily peripheries, explicitly mentioning breasts, outgrowing the limits of the body.¹⁷¹

The description of the woman as dressed and posing as a man is important on two slightly different levels—it implies that a "true woman" could not commit murder, and that she is a grotesque character from the beginning because of her looks and presentation, using Bakhtin's understanding of androgyny and any transgression from the binary norm as inherently grotesque. Not only does the woman murder Mary Lou and mutilate her body, but she also makes Melissa undress and then gives her a sexually sadistic beating, thus transgressing another taboo of women not being considered capable of sexual violence.

The female murderer commits a crime not permitted to a woman and thus functions as a grotesque counterpart to her female victims. Victimisation is a role determined for girls and women, and no one is truly surprised when Mary Lou is found murdered; she should not have gone with boys, after all. Grotesque treatment of gender is applied to all characters in the story; Hans' masculinity is also perceived in a grotesque light, when he is

¹⁶⁸ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 18.

¹⁶⁹ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 18.

¹⁷⁰ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 18.

¹⁷¹ Bakhtin 26.

labelled a killer.¹⁷² The assumption of Hans being the murderer is thus based solely on false expectations of gender, gender performance, and the confines of gender roles.

5. 4 The Invisible Violence in the Domestic Space in “The Premonition”

Until now, all of the discussed short stories have centred on female victims of gendered violence, and in the case of “Haunted,” the relationship between the female victims and the female perpetrator of violence. The short story “The Premonition” is different on two levels: it is the only one where the violence is only implied and not taking place in the story itself, and it features a female perpetrator of violence (although she was previously also a victim of domestic violence) and her male victim. It also takes place in the very gendered domestic space, which emphasises the grotesque atmosphere of the entire story, as the violence happens inside the most stereotypically heteronormative and binarily gendered framework of a nuclear family.

Just like in “Haunted,” there is an expectation (or premonition) of violence coming from men. The narrator, Whitney, arrives at the house of his brother Quinn because Quinn has allegedly been again abusing his wife and daughters. Precisely like in the previous short story, this knowledge of male violence on women is not at all disturbing or surprising for the characters, and they are mostly concerned about not getting involved in a conflict with Quinn just before Christmas. Whitney himself even mentions in passing that he has read a news item about a “middle-aged insurance executive who had shotgunned his estranged wife and their children.”¹⁷³

Quinn is portrayed as a hyperbolic version of the masculine stereotype and of the perfect husband and father: he is six feet three inches tall, weighs two hundred pounds, is a “very physical person,” and owns a luxurious house in suburbia and several guns. We are also told that he is arrogant, has problems with alcohol and his temper, is indifferent to his wife’s feelings, and has already assaulted her, in front of everyone at a family gathering.¹⁷⁴ Quinn is actually grotesquely seen as the ideal of masculinity by his family who is disappointed by Whitney who fails to conform to this norm and does not perform

¹⁷² De Nittis 23.

¹⁷³ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 176.

¹⁷⁴ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 183.

masculinity in the way his brother does. Quinn is a caricature of stereotypical masculinity, necessarily aggressive and violent, as well as physically occupying a great amount of space.

Ellen and her daughters are at home, in the domestic space assigned to them according to the confines of their gender role. They are all performing their gender and adhering to their gender role through meticulous housekeeping; for Whitney, there is “a distinctly female atmosphere in the room, with an undercut of hysteria.”¹⁷⁵ As “hysteria” is a necessarily gendered term, not functioning outside the framework of sexism, Whitney is not able to see Quinn’s wife and family without the normative structure of gender binary. Even though Ellen is at home and cleaning, Whitney immediately realises that her otherwise perfect gender performance is lacking: “Ellen was wearing stained slacks, a smock, an apron; her fair brown hair was brushed back indifferently...she wore no make-up, not even lipstick.”¹⁷⁶ Whitney assesses this change as disturbing, and suspects that something must have certainly gone wrong because Ellen is not performing Quinn’s wife anymore, when he says: “In public, as Quinn Paxton’s wife, Ellen was unfailingly glamorous—a quiet, reserved, beautiful woman who took obsessive care with grooming and clothes, and whose very speech patterns seemed premeditated.”¹⁷⁷ The symbolic change in Ellen’s looks signifies her radical breaking out of the gender role previously understood as “natural.”

But it is the lingering smell of blood, the “cloying, slightly rancid odor,”¹⁷⁸ that truly disturbs and scares Whitney, who decides not to think about the possibility of his brother being murdered and rather attributes the blood odour to menstruation; the thought of menstruation scares and repels Whitney since he heard one of his nieces remark about the other whom he still sees as a child: “Don’t mind Trish, she’s getting her period.”¹⁷⁹ Whitney is instantly embarrassed, and his embarrassment is nothing short of the grotesque fear which bodily processes awaken according to Bakhtin. Menstrual blood is a definite

¹⁷⁵ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 181.

¹⁷⁶ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 178.

¹⁷⁷ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 178.

¹⁷⁸ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 185.

¹⁷⁹ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 183.

example of the Bakhtinian bodily grotesque which is strongly connected to the processes of the lower body, and especially to those related to reproduction. It also denotes a body in the state of *becoming* and therefore inherently grotesque. The bodily horror of menstruation keeps Whitney from his “premonition,” the true horror of his brother being murdered. It is also significant that the smell of blood can be related to either death or life (in childbirth), i.e. it becomes the ultimate grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense.

Whitney nevertheless chooses to believe that the suspicious scent of blood is related to menstruation and leaves the house, feeling affectionate but also patronising towards his sister-in-law and nieces, thinking: “How characteristic of women, how sweet, that they trust us as they do; and that, at times at least, their trust is not misplaced.”¹⁸⁰ Exactly as Melissa’s mother in “Haunted,” he is not able or willing to believe in the possibility of the murder being committed by a woman, even if it is obvious from the way Ellen talks about Quinn’s alleged travelling plans, or the fact she omits his name from all of their Christmas presents.

The grotesque situation caused by the discrepancy between Whitney’s original “premonition”—his expectation of Ellen as a victim of violence—and the reality is built on the stereotypes of active masculinity and passive femininity, as well as the normatively gendered nature of violence. Just like the nameless murderer in “Haunted,” Ellen cannot possibly be seen as a perpetrator of violence by Whitney, because such a notion does not align with his understanding of gender.

Ellen has unarguably been an abused wife, and, as well as her daughters, a victim of domestic violence, and Quinn the perpetrator. She only once fails to adhere to the confines of her gender role: when she stops being the passive victim, and becomes the aggressor herself. She breaks from the limitations of her assigned gender only by violence and murder, which ironically takes place in the stereotypically feminine domestic space turned into a site of a very “un-feminine” aggressive act. On the outside, Ellen is still a passive wife taking meticulous care of the family home, but the cleaning now serves to remove blood, and the frantic wrapping of Christmas presents offers the disquieting

¹⁸⁰ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 187.

possibility of hiding the dismembered body, the loss of limbs being a common grotesque motif in Rabelais' world.¹⁸¹

5. 5 Infanticide and the Grotesque Mother Body in “Extenuating Circumstances”

While “The Premonition” features a seemingly perfect housewife as the example of the passive feminine stereotype with absolutely no identity of her own, the short story “Extenuating Circumstances” portrays the normative construction of binary gender from a different perspective. The nameless protagonist used to create her own identity outside of the heteronormative archetype of marriage and motherhood, studying to pursue her own self-sufficient career. Unlike Ellen in “The Premonition,” this woman was able to escape the traditional female role of passivity, but was forced back into it by unplanned pregnancy and motherhood.

Just like for Connie and all other female characters in the previous short stories, the choice has already been made for her. Even though she does not want to be a mother, she is forced to become one. What is more, she is forced to be a single parent, because the father of the child has left, using his patriarchal privilege to do so. The woman cannot leave because she is forced to care for a child she did not want to have; she is forced into the nurturing and motherly role which is prescribed by the normative gender framework. The narrator herself understands this when she says about the father of her child: “Because in granting me child support payments, you had a right to move away. Because I could not follow.”¹⁸² As articulated by Toril Moi and Judith Butler, there are no true “natural” characteristics that accompany gender. The assignment of the tendencies or strengths viewed by society as “natural” is a tool of patriarchy.¹⁸³ Moi also reminds us that this false biological essentialism always supports the patriarchy, as it creates a predefined pattern of femininity (and of binary schemes in general) one must conform to.¹⁸⁴

The narrator's individual identity as a person is taken away from her and replaced by the stereotype of a Mother. The normative gender framework of society denies her the

¹⁸¹ De Nittis 30.

¹⁸² Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 150.

¹⁸³ De Nittis 33.

¹⁸⁴ Belsey and Moore 123.

same right that the father of the child is granted: the right to leave her child and the maternal role. His masculinity is fulfilled by paying child support, while the protagonist is completely erased as a person, and then criticised for not being a good enough mother.

Gender roles are an essential theme of the story, not only in the conflict between the mother and father of the child, but also in the relationship of the mother to her son. She hates him, because he reminds her of his father, but at the same time, she wants him to adopt the stereotypical masculine role, to “be *Daddy* in his strength.”¹⁸⁵ Even though she is a victim of what is understood as masculine (i.e. activity and aggression), she herself reaffirms the gender binary and the stereotypical gender roles by wanting her son to fulfil the very same masculine stereotype. In the end, the narrator breaks out of the gender role assigned to her in a very brutal and at the same time highly symbolic way: by killing her child.

Infanticide can be seen as one of the most shocking crimes, as it breaks one of the patriarchal society’s strongest taboos: it opposes the stereotypical concept of women as naturally nurturing and protective. From this perspective, this murder is even more socially transgressive than Rhea and Rhonda’s murder in “Heat” (even though they are also children) or the sexual violence committed by a woman in “Haunted,” precisely because it disproves the assumption of women as inherently passive and nurturing most radically.

“Extenuating Circumstances” is also a story which, similar to “Haunted,” features the grotesque body, and this body is seen through an indisputably gendered gaze. According to Bakhtin, childbirth is the essence of the bodily grotesque and it is childbirth that has permanently changed the protagonist’s body. She refers to her body as “misshapen” and disgusting: “Because I had gained seven pounds from last Sunday to this, the waist of my slacks is so tight. Because I hate the fat of my body.”¹⁸⁶ The subsequent swelling of her body is a literal transgression of boundaries, reminiscent of the swelling of pregnancy.

Another sign of the bodily grotesque is bleeding. Here it is not unexpected as in “The Premonition,” but grotesque in its excessiveness. Bleeding is associated both with menstruation and childbirth, and—most importantly—the heavy bleeding restricts the

¹⁸⁵ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 149.

¹⁸⁶ Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* 151.

narrator to her home. She is literally forced to stay in the domestic space assigned to her as a part of the confines of her gender role.

The title of the story is unarguably important, as there might be more than one understanding of what those extenuating circumstances are. Michael Lee in his analysis suggests that those are the extreme mental states the narrator has experienced since childbirth,¹⁸⁷ and those are indeed mentioned in the story, but it is the suppression of her individual self and the passive gender role forced upon her that ultimately make the protagonist kill her son, possibly because it is his destruction that will erase her transformation from a person to a Mother, and thus undo what made her grotesque.

¹⁸⁷ De Nittis 35.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

After analysis and comparison of the five selected short stories by Joyce Carol Oates, it is apparent that all of them feature the gendered grotesque as one of their essential structural elements. Gender is thus an indisputable part of the grotesque, clearly present in all aforementioned stories, and it works on several different but interconnected levels.

First of all, there is the notion of assigned gender roles that dictate the relationships between the characters, and those relationships then project into gendered violence. It is gender roles enforced by the normative gender framework (grounded in gender binarism and heteronormativity) that assign the normative victims and perpetrators of violence.

The short stories can be simply divided into three groups: the stories with gender roles corresponding to the normative matrix of binary gender (i.e. a female victim and a male perpetrator of violence, as seen in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” and “Heat”), the one with female victims *and* female aggressor (“Haunted”), and finally those where the violence is carried out by a female perpetrator on a male victim (“The Premonition” and “Extenuating Circumstances”). The perpetrators of violence in the stories correspond with Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque (understanding the feminine as inherently grotesque), and also with the typology of the grotesque characters as coined by Haar (especially in the character of Roger Whipple, who is not understood as fully male because of his disability).

It is important to realise how the gender roles of the characters are rooted in stereotypical masculinity (most apparent in the portrayal of Arnold Friend) and in femininity that is viewed as inherently passive. The grotesque discrepancy between the expected and the reality (especially visible in “The Premonition” and also in “Haunted”) would not function without the gendered structure of violence.

The violence taking place in all of the stories is directly dependent on the category of gender and the stereotypes of victim and perpetrator emerging from it. In three of the stories, the fact that the perpetrator is female radically disrupts the stereotype of female victimisation, especially as two of the perpetrators also commit particularly taboo crimes, seen—as a rule—as “unfeminine,” i.e. impossible for women (sexual violence in “Haunted” and infanticide in “Extenuating Circumstances”). Gendered violence is a theme in all of the analysed stories, and can be decidedly understood as related to both gender and

the grotesque.

Another gendered grotesque motif of the stories is the presence of the grotesque bodies referring to Bakhtin's bodily grotesque, Russo's feminist critique of Bakhtinian bodily concepts, and also the understanding of transgressive bodies according to Butler and Foucault. The grotesque bodies are seen through a binarily gendered gaze and typically described by bodily processes, which are, according to Bakhtin, inherently grotesque.

The aim of the thesis has thus been fulfilled as all of the analysed stories have been shown to feature the gendered grotesque and gendered violence; their entire structures are directly based on the normative category of gender. It is nevertheless also essential to consider the possible limitations of this thesis or complications of its conclusions. The extent of analysed textual material is small, due to the limited space of a bachelor's thesis, and the conclusions are thus understandably restricted, especially considering the notoriously large corpus of Oates' works.

I believe that it is possible, however, to apply the conclusions from this thesis to more of Oates' short stories,¹⁸⁸ as well as to consider gendered violence as a theme appearing throughout her work, including her short stories as well as selected novels.¹⁸⁹ It would also be worthwhile to consider more profoundly the critique of Oates' work from a feminist perspective,¹⁹⁰ as there are certainly interpretations both for and against the understanding of her work as feminist.

The analysis at the level of transgressive bodies, which are normatively considered grotesque, can also be expanded to a more comparative perspective of bodies and identities transgressing the normative matrix of binary gender and compulsory heterosexuality. The novels immediately suggesting themselves include *The Passion of New Eve* by Angela Carter, *Invisible Monsters* by Chuck Palahniuk, *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Robber Bride* by Margaret Atwood, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin. This thesis has been mostly written from the perspective of gender theory and the critique of the normative gender binarism and biological determinism it presents; it would certainly be beneficial to include the perspective of disability studies and selected contemporary

¹⁸⁸ Such as "Don't You Trust Me?", "Phase Change," "The Bingo Master," and "The Guilty Party" etc.

¹⁸⁹ For example *We Were the Mulvaney's*, *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*, and *Daddy Love*.

¹⁹⁰ As briefly mentioned in the introduction to Chapter 5 (page 36).

feminist theories¹⁹¹ in the consideration of transgressive bodies and their relation to the bodily grotesque.

¹⁹¹ As formulated for example by Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Julia Serano.

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